Nanni Balestrini

TWO SHORT STORIES:

Let A Thousand Hands Reach Out To Pick Up The Gun + FIAT

Let A Thousand Hands Reach Out To Pick Up The Gun

At 10.45 the coroner begins the autopsy will finish at about 1 o'clock with the following result the young woman had been hit by two bullets one hit her in the left shoulder and the other the fatal one went through her chest. The officer comes down tells his men to keep at a distance he goes towards the farmhouse which was supposed to be abandoned according to information received previously. Three hours of tension pass while doubts questions hypotheses proliferate at 4.30 the two sisters arrive at the carabineri barracks in a police car they reach the hospital shortly before 5 o'clock. The attempt to escape in a red Fiat 127 and a white Fiat 128 was blocked by the carabinieri but while the women had dived to the ground coming out of the lefthand driver's door the man had inexplicably exited by the right door in other words on the side most exposed to enemy fire.

A corpse with no name it is that of a woman between 35 and 40 with curly red hair she is dressed in a beige jumper faded jeans and red sandals with a raised cord heel. The lieutenant goes up to the farmhouse to peer through a groundfloor window it is at this moment that a SRCM-type hand grenade is thrown from the floor above. They stand up and proceed slowly towards the the morgue at the door the public prosecutor is waiting for them they betray no emotion remain impassive before the photographers' flashguns the door closes behind them. The doors of the criminals' car spring open and suddenly a hail of gunfire explodes because they have two pistols and a sten gun with them.

Her face looks strange in death one might say surprised she is wearing very tight jeans and a beige sweater but it is all stained red so you guess the colour rather than see it. He went and banged on the door saying carabin-

ieri here at this point a first-floor window opened out of which a woman appeared who replied what do you want the officer demanded entry and from another window the first hand grenade was thrown. It was not a long wait at 5.15 the public prosecutor comes out nods his head it's her he says they recognised her at once they only had to look at her face. They were cut off, and the red Fiat 127 collided with the 128 these were the last moments of violence the robbers again leapt out and ran off across the grass heading downhill.

In the area of the shoot-out a fierce battle that lasted more than half an hour a young woman was killed who belonged to the kidnappers' gang. The lieutenant called up support there's someone there come out in reply a window was flung open on the first floor and two hand grenades thrown at the same time explode the splinters lacerate the officer's arm and face. There would anyway have been other elements that would have made identification easy a small ring the sisters had a similar ring the mother had given to all three ten years previously. Still in the 127 and the 128 the woman and her accomplice fire at the officer then seeing that escape is impossible the way out is also blocked by the blue FIAT 127 patrol car the gangsters start running towards the woods across the grass around the farmhouse.

The body lying on the slope of the hill the red hair splayed across the green the face disfigured this was the end of her short life in the din of gunfire of exploding grenades of a desperate bid for freedom broken off by a hail of bullets. At that moment from a window on the first floor a hand grenade is thrown which explodes a few yards from the lieutenant taking off his arm and injuring his eyes. The woman terrorist killed yesterday in the shootout at the farmhouse finally has a name. The carabiniere officer seeing that the criminals are not accepting defeat himself fires a first hail of bullets that seems to scare the two out in the open.

The central nucleus of the inquest is represented by the few square metres of the morgue in which the still nameless woman's body lay. The explosion tore the officer's arm off the grenade splinters blind him he falls headlong while a pool of blood extends around his body. It seems it was not easy to establish the woman's identity on her was found a fresh identity card coming from a stock of stolen documents. As they came round the corner of the farmhouse they found our 127 in the way in the attempt to get round it they went off the road then they got out raising their hands we surrender they were ten yards from me in the grass I raised my gun the man was sheltering behind the woman.

Who is the dead woman the question had no answer until this morning but in fact she was identified almost at once. The sergeant and the private run up but they are forced to throw themselves flat because a second grenade is thrown from the farmhouse wounding both of them. The identikit pictures in the possession of the carabinieri however did not bear much resemblance to the victim at the farmhouse in order to avoid recognition the woman had cut off her long black hair. All of a sudden the man turned back OK we surrender he shouted and almost at the same time a series of gunshots were fired in the direction of the sergeant and the private was also wounded.

There is a tense of waiting it is an important moment because it can make a decisive contribution to assisting the police inquiries enabling them to construct an identikit of the gang's members. This was the start of a fierce exchange of gunfire single shots and series of shots from inside two men and a woman were firing and perhaps another man too who had come out and who had managed to escape. She had dyed her hair red also her features were hardened by the hardships endured during the long period of years that she had been in hiding. Finally the others shouted that they were surrendering pointing his gun the carabiniere told them to come forward slowly the woman in front and the man behind.

Central command confirms that the four carabinieri of the patrol had come under fire from a man and a third person the woman had then been killed while her accomplice although wounded had managed to reach the bushes. The door is thrown open and a man and a woman come running out into the yard they throw another grenade they are holding sub-machine guns they fire wildly the sergeant and the private fall to the ground. Formal identification was made possible once the name had been established for the first time at 5.10 today at the hospital morgue. They put their hands up and shout we surrender but instead of standing still or walking forward the girls are holding guns the other man still has a sten gun the gangsters back off.

How many accomplices two men and a woman two women and a man one man and a woman yesterday the second version was given as the official one. There is also a series of shots from the machine pistol and one of the bullets hits the private in the head the sergeant was wounded too in the leg. She was identified by her sisters who had not seen her for 5 years on the basis of various identifying marks a small scar on one lip some moles and a ring with the same setting which the three daughters had in common with

their mother. The woman and her accomplice came down and the officer instructed them to put their hands up the gangsters raised their hands and the man shouted OK that's enough I've been hit but at the same time his hands went down towards his belt.

The carabinieri who were engaged in a gun battle with the people in the farmhouse state that they had seen only one man and one woman there was talk of two women of another individual who had been seen or heard escaping after the shoot-out. Immediately afterwards this same woman had thrown the second grenade it is not known how many of them there were but it is known that the woman got into the orange Fiat 127 and her accomplice into the white 128 and then the two cars collided and ended up in the ditch. The official identification was carried out by the woman's two sisters they had not seen her for 5 years they said but they identified her at once thanks to particular marks, especially a number of moles. Suddenly the man stops turns round puts his hands up and shouts OK I give up I'm wounded I surrender but he immediately puts his hands down again takes a grenade from his belt and throws it at the carabiniere.

Up at the farmhouse the branch of a cherry tree torn off by a burst of gunfire testifies to the violence of the bloody clash between the carabinieri and the bandits. A man and a woman were the people who came out of the farmhouse after the throwing of the grenade which had knocked the lieutenant to the ground shooting wildly and mowing down the private they had reached and started the 127 and the 128. Before arriving at the lying-in room at the hospital already at the carabinieri headquarters they had identified the identical ring their mother had given them. Suddenly no sooner had the officer lowered his gun they made a break for it in his left hand the gangster has a second grenade once again a SRCM and he throws this one too this time at the lone officer.

Other evidence of the battle can be seen in the shattered glass of the windows in the window shutter blown off its hinges by the blast from an SRCM on the grass where the woman was shot down the blood looks like rust. Then the gangsters having hit the private too with a burst of gunfire tried to get away trying to get away in their car in order to get round the blue 127 carabiniere patrol car they dived towards the ditch running alongside the path. The identification happened at 5.10 in the morgue of the general hospital at that time the two sisters arrived they came into the room together with the public prosecutor. He seemed to be intending to use her as a shield I saw him put one hand inside his jacket I thought he was going

to pull out a gun instead he pulled out another grenade he threw it in my direction

On the bodywork there are bullet holes the 127 has a shattered windscreen the sidelight of the 128 is blown out and it has a big 9mm bullet hole in its left side. There is a moment's pause in the jeep the driver takes the radio mike and makes contact with his patrol few words hurry I am here he repeats the phrase three times. Seeing the naked body of the woman marked by the cuts made during the autopsy more than by the facial resemblance they had not seen her for 5 years. I threw myself forward it exploded behind me I had run out of bullets I leaned over the private's body I took the magazine from his gun I put it in mine.

There are still the two cars which were to be used for the gangsters' final getaway they are a red 127 and a white 128 it appears they crashed and ended up half in a ditch. Meanwhile with his other hand he takes his service pistol and in turn rushes towards the farmhouse while two women and a man are running towards a car. They were able to identify her on the basis of a number of moles and a cut on one lip one detail which convinced them was a small ring which the body was still wearing on the ring finger of the left hand. When one of the pair suddenly pulled out a grenade and threw it in the direction of the officer he dived to one side then threw himself forward keeping low and escaping the effects of the blast.

Here are a number of different-coloured wigs used by the young woman as disguises in her exploits. The driver runs over he is a soldier married fifty years old with 4 children calm thoughtful brave he takes the 9mm gun with 7 bullets in it he sees his colleagues on the ground shot up his nerve steady he has not a moment of uncertainty. A gold ring with three small black stones it was a memento of her mother she had given an identical one to each of the daughters also getting one made for herself the flurry of confusion about her identity was thus resolved. The man had shouted enough I'm wounded I surrender but almost simultaneously he had thrown another grenade and the driver of the patrol car ducking in order to avoid it had fired at the woman who was killed while the man succeeded in escaping.

She is the head of the bandit group which breaks into prison she is the one who rings the bell at the front gate and who runs towards the cell a short-barrelled machine pistol under her arm while her colleagues immobilise the warders. The officer fires a shot but over their heads to indicate that they should stop as regulations require the fugitives do not stop they

reach a 127 parked under the trees and try to make a getaway. The identification of the woman was carried out at about 5.30 in the morgue where the body had been taken by the two sisters. He took out a grenade and threw it at the soldier he realised what was happening he threw himself forwards avoiding the blast of the grenade which went off behind him and he fired his gun hitting the woman.

On that day in mid-February the trail went cold it re-emerged again on Thursday concluding in the image of the young woman stretched on the ground dead after the grenade battle with the carabinieri. Between the gangsters and the carabiniere who in the meantime had taken his pistol and had thrown himself to the ground to the left shielding himself behind the car there was an exchange of gunfire. The identifying features which made the identification possible were a series of moles that the woman had on her back a scar mark on one lip and a ring which she was wearing on her hand. The officer dives forward and while the grenade flies over his head and explodes behind him he shoots with his issue 9mm pistol the woman is in the line of fire and falls hit by two bullets which go through her chest and her right arm.

Women with guns at their side women who rob who kidnap who attack prisons who shoot representatives of the law and of the state woman who have followed their road to the end going from the role of support and consoler of their male colleagues to that of protagonists. The man and the woman he relates in a low voice barely marked by the emotion which has taken hold of him since the tragedy they got into the 128 and the 127 parked on the grass they left in a hurry perhaps because they thought they had killed the whole patrol. This latter detail was decisive it was a ring with three mounted stones which had been given by the mother to all three sisters. There followed another shoot-out in the course of which the woman was hit at this point according to the false version provided by headquarters the carabiniere ran out of ammunition and the other man took advantage of this to escape.

In the yard of the farmhouse at the point where she had been struck down this morning there were found six red roses. Immediately afterwards he saw the bandits' two cars which were trying to get past the carabinieri's car which was blocking their way but they got out onto the road ending up in a ditch. Yes it's her the two sisters told the magistrate its been 5 years since we last saw her standing arm in arm they looked at the dead woman weeping in silence the body of the woman was stretched out naked on the

marble bench. From the man's sub-machine gun came the series of shots that hit the woman and also hit the man who even though with a bullet in his body managed to reach the first line of trees and disappear into the woods.

Naturally nobody knows who left the bunch of red roses nobody has seen anything and none of the local farm people have seen strangers. However their line of escape is blocked in front of them is the carabinieri's 128 across the middle of the road the bandits have no time to go into reverse. A patch of blood in the centre of the chest another on the left arm the fingers of the right hand blackened and contracted as if frozen in the act of gripping the earth the left hand wearing a gold ring with three small stones. And I started shooting again and downed the girl who was screaming wildly the man also started shouting I'm wounded and he ran off into the fields and disappeared.

Then for the whole of the day the searching of the woods continued an operation in which 300 carabinieri 80 policemen 20 finance guards 6 helicopters and a number of dog-handler units are still involved. The carabiniere fires a second shot which one assumes hit the man who was on the back seat of the 127 a bloodstain was found afterwards. The black hair in the subdued light of the morgue not red as it had appeared at a distance yesterday in the sunlight between the trees on her lip a small scar. It was found the bullets still in the magazine one of the girls ended up killed while the soldier tries to reload his weapon the accomplices manage to escape on the young woman's chest there are three holes the demonstration.

FIAT

I never bothered with politics before Fiat. Now I was seeing students handing out leaflets in front of the Fiat gate. And they wanted to talk with the workers. Which seemed kind of strange. I said to myself: What the hell, these guys with all the free time they have for balling and fooling around, they come and stand in front of the factory, which has got to be the most disgusting thing there is. I mean really the most absurd and disgusting thing there is. They come here in front of the factory, for what? I was kind of curious about this, but I finally just figured they were crazies, missionaries, thickheads. So I wasn't interested in what they were saying.

This was in Spring. In April. I'd never been to any of the meetings the students used to have. Though I did go to the May Day celebration once. A workers' holiday was something I couldn't even conceive of. This has got to be some kind of joke, a holiday that celebrates work. The workers' feast-day, the workers celebrating work. I couldn't figure out what either meant - a workers' holiday, or a holiday celebrating work. I could never figure why work had to be celebrated. Anyway, when I wasn't at work I didn't know what the fuck to do. Because I was a worker, I mean a man who spends most of the day inside a factory, and so the rest of the time all's I could do was rest up for the next day. That holiday, though, just for the hell of it, I went to the May Day celebration to hear some assembly, some group or other I wasn't familiar with.

And I saw all these people wearing red ties. Red flags. They were saying things I already knew about, more or less. It's not that I'm a Martian or something. What I mean is, I knew what they were talking about even if I didn't understand them. The boojwa was standing in front of all the spiffy bars around the piazza. The petty boojwa was there too - farmers, small businessmen, priests, people with their little bank-books, students, intellectuals, jobbers, clerks, and other kinds of kissasses. Listening to the union

speeches. And there, in between the unions standing in the middle of the piazza and the boojwa in front of the bars all around the piazza, was that mob of workers, a different race. And there between the boojwa and the workers was that big fat display, the car, FIAT.

A holiday, in other words, a fair. I listened to the union leaders. Brothers! We mustn't just say these things outside here today, we must say them - and do them - tomorrow inside the factories. And I thought, okay, this guy's right. What good's a holiday? You make a lot of noise only when they let you stand around holding your red flag in the piazza. We have to do this in the factory, too.

I went about my own business then, and saw another demonstration. People yelling MAO TSE TUNG HO CHI MINH. Who are these guys, I asked myself. More red flags, more protest signs. But all this was still new to me. I was still in the dark. A few weeks later I dropped in on a student meeting in a bar just outside Mirafiori. But by that time I'd already spent a few days stirring up trouble in the factory. I was in Fiat shop number 54, Body Division, on the Model 500 line. I'd been there a month, counting from the day after I passed my physical to get into Fiat.

There were two thousand of us at the physical exam, everybody got a number, and they asked us shit ass questions. Prepared questions, the same questions for everybody. But there were so many of us that those poor bastards asking the questions went pretty fast. They looked you in the face and shot a couple of questions at you. You answered something and they told you to move to the next room. So you went to the next room. In the next room was a guard holding a list, calling us twenty at a time then taking us to another room where they were giving the physicals.

The first exam was an eye check-up. Look here, close your eye, look up, read that - this kind of stuff. Then hearing, to find out if your ears worked. Raise your right leg, raise your left leg. They checked our teeth, nose, eyes, ears, throat. What with all these tests it got to be two o'clock. At two they told us we could go to eat. We had to go to this morning session on an empty stomach. Couldn't eat anything, couldn't drink anything. Because they wanted to do a blood analysis. Some managed to get the blood test over with by two o'clock. Others didn't. The ones who had to come back in the afternoon for the blood test weren't allowed to eat at two. They starved from the night before.

Outside you could smell the stench coming from where they were doing the blood tests. Inside were thousands of test tubes filled with blood, all over the place. Blood-soaked cotton swabs everywhere. On one side a pile of blood-red cotton three and a half feet high. It hurt when they took your blood because they weren't watching where they stuck the needle. They just stuck it anywhere, pulled it out, then put the test tube to one side and threw the blood-soaked cotton to the other side on top of the pile.

From there we went to another room where the nurse handed us a glass. There were just two bathrooms where you could go inside and piss. We all formed a circle and started pissing in our glasses. We laughed, said we were making beer. We put the glass up on top and the nurse asked us our name, then wrote it down on a sheet of paper under the number of each person's glass.

Next day, the general physical. You had to lift a weight. They had some machine with weights attached. To check how strong we were. They spent two hours on this test because there were two thousand of us, and they had to put all two thousand of us through it. Not everybody got to take it that day, so they had to come back the next day. Six, maybe seven hours, just for this test. After you passed it you had to wait your turn for the general hysical. You stripped naked.

You stood there naked in front of the witch doctor. He asked you questions, sitting there in his white smock. What your name was, how old you were, if you'd done military service, if you were engaged. Then he made you march. Go forward, come back, raise your arm, lower your arm, squat down, show me your hands, show me your feet, now the bottoms. Then he checked your balls, to make sure you had them. Say thirty-three, cough, breathe, and all this kind of crap. A whole day to take this exam, because it took a quarter-hour for each person, and there were two thousand of us.

Then the witch doctor said to me: Have you ever had an operation? It was damn obvious I'd never had an operation, since I didn't have any scars, thank God. Yeah, I say, on my left ball. How did it happen? The guy was scared because he hadn't noticed it before. I said to myself, now I'll give this doctor a chance to show his stuff. It's from playing soccer, I answered. I got kicked in the balls and they had to operate.

Really? Alright then, you'll have to come for a check-up tomorrow. Another guy said he had broken his arm, so he had to come back the next

day, too. What this did, I think, was screw it into the worker's head that he had to be healthy, whole, etc. etc., whatever fucking good this does. Because the fact is they took all of us, even the ones who couldn't hear, or who wore glasses, or were lame or had an arm in a cast. Everybody, I mean everybody, down to the last man. A paralytic's maybe the only one they wouldn't have taken.

We went for the check-up the next day. They sent me to a room with another witch doctor, though this one wasn't even wearing a white smock. All he had was a nice blond secretary who waggled her ass back and forth across the room. She brought him my chart and he sat down on a stool. He had me pull down my pants and underwear, then he felt my balls. Where did you have the operation? On this one, here. Pull your pants up. I pulled them back up, he didn't say anything to me. The nice nurse gave me a card saying I had to report to Fiat two days later.

Two days later all the guys who had passed the physical were there at Fiat. I mean all of them. Some guy from Personnel came over right away. Or maybe he was in public relations, or a psychologist, or a social assistant. Nobody knew who the fuck he was. So he comes over and says: Friends! Welcome to Fiat, both from me and from the management who's hiring you. Wonderful, terrific. Everybody claps. The Personnel Office, he says, is available to Fiat employees who have children, social problems that need solving, and other such things. If you need money ask us. So a few guys from Naples say: Yeah, I could use about ten thousand lire. No, not like this, not now, you have to ask for the loan when you're working. If you have real needs. For now you'll have to take care of such things on your own. Then when you're working you can ask for a loan.

Then they bumped us downstairs from the offices into Fiat, into the factory itself. Some other whosit, some clerk, took our numbers away and gave us new ones. A dressing-room number, corridor number, locker number, shop number, and line number. They kept us there practically half the day doing all this. Then we went into the big boss's office, the Body Division engineer. We went in three at a time, he was obviously asking everybody the same questions, the same spiel, using the same words every time for everybody.

I welcome you to Fiat. You already know what Fiat is, in Italy Fiat is everything. Maybe you've read some bad things in the Communist press, complaining about our assembly line, but they're all lies. Because the only

workers here who don't get along are the lazy ones. The ones who don't want to work. Everybody else works, they're happy to work, and they feel good working. They all have cars, and Fiat also has nurseries for the children of its employees. Then too, if you're a Fiat employee, you get discounts at certain stores. All he did was apologize to us.

This guy too, like the others, didn't ask any specific questions. He didn't say anything that would apply to us individually, or personally. It's obvious that they treat their office-workers personally because there are fewer of them. But we were a mob, a flood. Not just two thousand of us, but twenty thousand newly hired workers all told. The monsters were arriving, the dreadful workers. And so for two months they were asking everybody the same questions, doing the same job.

So that even the guys doing this job were being pushed around by Fiat. I mean, this mob of workers entering Fiat had reduced even the clerks, even the doctors, to the level of the working class. What was happening really had nothing to do with selection, it was just a way of passing on a concept of organization, of discipline, a pecking order. Otherwise they wouldn't have taken on even those who weren't there, I mean the ones who were really sick, who were really in bad shape. But they took everybody, because they could use everybody. Everybody was okay for that kind of work.

And this guy, the engineer, says: I'm your colonel, and you're my men; so we have to respect one another. I've always stood up for my workers. Fiat workers are the best, they produce more than anyone else . . . and all this kind of bullshit. So I start getting a little pissed at this, and I start thinking: Things are going to get pretty messy with this here colonel. Then he explained to us how it's stupid to sabotage production because aside from being canned on the spot we'd also be reported to the police. He pulled out an article of the penal code that said we'd be reported to the police. He was starting his terror tactics. I thought to myself: This here colonel needs to be taught a good lesson.

Then the bosses introduced themselves to each of us. They had already split us up. Up till then we had been a mob, now they divided us, four or five on each line. I was going on the 500 line, so they introduced me to my boss. The foreman. Then my foreman introduced me to the floater. These are the workers who know how to do all the jobs on the line. If you have to go take a crap or piss - when they let you go, I mean, because you have to have permission - the floater steps in and takes your place. Or if you're

feeling sick, or make a mistake or something. The floater steps in, the joker, the one who can do everything.

They introduced these guys to me and had me stand near the line. There were still two hours left to go before quitting, so the boss had me do small operations, meaningless stuff. The assembly line looked like easy work to me. The way the line moved, the way all these guys worked. It didn't look like too much trouble. The next day, they grab me and take me to my position, another place, another line. They introduce another boss to me, the next day, when I'm supposed to start working. This guy calls a floater and tells him: Take him over there. Anyway, I ended up where I was putting large ring-plates on the 500 model. I had to center them on the engine, put two bolts in, then tighten them with some gizmo.

I took the ring-plate, while the body of the 500 was moving down overhead and the engine coming from another direction, and I set the ring-plate in place. It weighed about 22 pounds. I got the plate from some other place where a guy was setting them up, then I put it on top of the engine and put two bolts in it. I drilled in the two bolts with this automatic air-wrench, fast, *brrrr brrrr*, then the whole thing moved off while another one arrived. I had twenty seconds to do it in, I had to catch the rhythm of it. The first few days I couldn't get the knack of it, so the floater helped me. For three days, he helped me.

On a Fiat line it's not a matter of learning anything, but just getting your muscles used to it. Getting your muscles used to the strain, using those movements, that rhythm. Having to put one of those jobbies in every twenty seconds meant you had to develop movements faster than your heartbeat. I mean, like a finger, the eye, anything, you had to move it in tenths of a second. Mandatory operations in a fraction of a second. The operation of selecting the two washers, the operation of selecting the two bolts, then all those movements, were all operations the muscles and eye had to perform on their own, automatically, without my having to decide anything. All I had to do was keep up the rhythm of those movements, repeating them in order, the same ones over and over. Until you've spent three or four days getting that rhythm, you just can't hack it.

Once I started getting used to doing it myself, the guy that was helping me left me alone. I realized that here inside it was in their interest to increase the operations we did. A lot of the new people, some were working half a day, some one day, some three, some worked a week, then they left.

Especially the young guys, a lot of them left right away, after seeing the kind of shit slave work that was involved. Who the fuck wants to stay on here? And so they left. Then there was a bunch of others taking sick leave every day. Since there were less workers than were supposed to work on the line, they had to make each of us do a lot more operations. If they didn't they'd have to keep on a lot of those guys, who weren't doing them any good because they were never there. So they stuck me with an extra operation. I started getting pissed off at this, and ended up hurting my finger a little.

My fingernail got a little crushed, but not so it hurt all that much. I put some grease on it, though, black grease, on my finger, so that it looked like black, clotted blood. The nail was a little black, and the finger was black. I called the floater over and told him I had to go to the infirmary. The foreman came over and said: You want to go to the infirmary? Yeah, I hurt my finger. But you can't go to the infirmary for something like this. Well, I'm going anyway. No you're not. Then another boss came over, the 500 boss. What I mean is, there's a boss for the Body Division, then a boss for the 500 model, a boss for the 850 and one for the 124. And each of these, the 124, the 500, and the 850, has its own lines. The 850's got four or five lines, the 500 has six or seven lines, the 124 has two or three.

The 500 boss came over and said to me: Listen, I'll make you a proposition. You decide whether you want to go see the doctor, go to the infirmary with that finger, or if you want to stay here. If you want to stay here, I'll put you on an easy job. If you decide to go see the doctor and the doctor refuses to treat you, I'll put you on the heaviest job around, in fact I'll get you suspended from work. So I take him up on this and say: I want to go see the doctor. So he writes me a note, because you have to have a note to go up to the infirmary. We'll see, he threatens me. I went to the infirmary and as I was walking in I saw a worker leaving, with his arm all bandaged where he had cut himself. You going home? I ask him. No, they wouldn't let me. What, with that cut on your arm, they wouldn't let you? No.

That really pissed me off, and I said to myself: Okay, even if there's nothing wrong with this finger, I'm going to get myself ten days. What's going on, anyway? That guy had really hurt himself and they tell him: No, you have to work. Are we all crazy, or what? We at war? What's this, Vietnam? All these people bloodied-up and wounded, do they still have to work? I walked into the infirmary, and there were more wounded men arriving then, too.

That infirmary was always packed, really, it looked like an army hospital. What with all these workers constantly coming in with a crushed hand, or a cut somewhere, or with something broken. One guy there had a dropped hernia; he was screaming. They called an ambulance and took him to emergency.

I started bluffing as soon as I got there. I checked and felt my finger, making sure when I was supposed to scream. When they touched my finger I started cursing in dialect, in Neapolitan. The guy who checked me was from Turin, and it had a certain effect on him. Because if I cursed in regular Italian it might look like I was acting, but when I cursed in Neapolitan the guy didn't know whether I was acting or not. *Mannaggia 'a maronna, me stai cacando 'o cazzo, statte fermo porco dio!* – this is the kind of stuff I said. But I have to examine you, he said, so keep still. What still? I hurt my finger, it's broken, right here. And he says: I want to see if it's broken; I don't know that it's broken. I do, though, it feels broken; I can't even move it.

A doctor comes over, the one who had looked at the guy with the hernia. He says: Alright, give him a slip, six days. Six days, he says, then if it's still hurting you we'll put you in the hospital. He gives me a slip, and I walk out. I go to the boss and say: He gave me six days. And the guy starts turning black with anger, thinking: This prick fooled me; he'll have six days sick leave, at Fiat's expense. Because MALF had to pay me for them. It's not like the sick-pay they have now, INAM, the Istituto Nazionale. INAM doesn't pay for the first three sick days; but with MALF you used to get paid from the first day on. Getting that sick-pay was a great way of gypping Fiat, and in fact they later got rid of it.

So I go home. At home I made sure I didn't wash the finger that was all black and greasy. Never washed it, didn't move it, either, and I was careful not to lean it against anything. After six days it had swelled up a little. Which is exactly why I never moved it, to make it swell. If you move your fingers, the fingers get limber. But if you smash your finger and then never move it, the finger gets really swollen, it gets bigger than the others. Not all that swollen, but enough so's you can see it's a little bigger. And it looks smoother, too, because you haven't let anything touch it.

After my six days I go back. I say: Look how the finger's got all swollen; and it feels like it hurts more than before. But can't you work with it? No, we work with our hands. If I have to pick up a bolt, or have to get my gun – I mean the thing that secures the bolts, we call it a gun – I have to use my

hands. Now either I watch what I'm doing, watch the bolts I have to grab, or else I watch that my finger doesn't touch anything. But the way it is now I'd have to watch what I'm doing and watch my finger. But this is impossible, because if I do, then after three hours of fast banging against one thing and another I'll end up a nervous wreck, I'll go crazy, I'll throw something at somebody's head ... I just can't do it.

The doctor guesses that I'm bluffing, and makes me a proposition: Which do you prefer? To go back to work, or to be sent to the hospital to recover? I say to myself: I'll have to tough this out, because I know sending me to the hospital just costs them more money. And he can't justify putting a worker in the hospital just for a finger, he can't do it. He was trying to bluff me, thinking: This guy wants another three or four days off, so I'll threaten him; he'll rather go back to the factory than into the hospital. Once you're in the hospital you're obviously screwed, I mean you can't have any fun, you just stay inside, that's all. I say: No, then, I'll go to the hospital; because as far as I'm concerned my finger still hurts, it's not healed. So he says to another guy: Give this one here a hospital pass. I turned green, thinking: The prick fooled me. But I kept my mouth shut, though I almost said I'd go back to work. I stretch my neck trying to see the pass, and I saw he was writing me up for another six days. I don't say anything. I get the pass and leave. Neither of us says anything. I didn't even have to say, Okay I won't go to the hospital. We both knew we had each other by the balls.

And so I got myself twelve days paid sick-leave. I felt happy. Because I had managed to beat out the job, beat the system, making it work to my advantage. Except that those days I wasn't working I didn't know what the fuck to do with myself all day. I sort of hung out around the Valentino, where all the whores and faggots were. I just walked around, you know, screwed up really, I was bored, I didn't know what to do with myself even if I'd had money. Fiat was paying me almost 120,000 lire a month. They paid you an advance every fifteen days, and out of my first advance I gave 40,000 lire to my sister, who I was staying with.

So I had 10,000 lire left, 10,000 lire that I just pissed away in a couple of days. Partly because I didn't know what the fuck to do. Going from one bar to another, buying newspapers, Playmen, comic books....I went to the movies, I didn't know what else to fucking do. I ate up that money without knowing what the fuck I was doing. Like I was resting up, because I felt so tired out by a shit job. Which is pretty absurd, I mean really absurd. Because during those twelve days of paid sick-leave I realized that I didn't even

know how to rest up from work, and that I didn't know what to fucking do in Turin.

After those twelve days of sick leave - which anyhow I got at Fiat's expense, because I didn't give a shit about them - I got back inside the factory. They started me out tightening mufflers, and I decided to fuck up my new floater. See, when you have to learn a new operation, the floater's right there to teach it to you. And I wanted to fuck this guy up because all floaters are scabs, people who've been working there for three, maybe ten, years. He was showing me what to do: Got that? *brrrr brrrr brrrr.* Now you do the next one. So I went *brrrrrrr* and slowed down. I pretended the gun ran down on me, that it was jammed near the bolt. I called the floater: Come here, quick. I can't do it, see?

Christ Almighty! Christ Almighty! the guy started saying. He was Turinese, the kind they call barott, they come from farmer stock around the outskirts of Turin. They're still farmers; they own land, which their wives work. They're commuters, very tough people, thick-headed, with no imagination, dangerous. Not fascists, just thick-headed. Communists is what they are - Bread and Work. I, at least, was a hopeless case, because I didn't care much about politics. But these guys thought work was the ultimate thing, work was everything to them, I mean everything, and they showed it the way they acted. They stayed and worked for years, for three, maybe ten, years. So that they got old fast and died young. Just for those few lire that never go far enough anyway - only a thickhead, a lackey, could do it. You spend years in this prison of shit, doing a job that totally destroys you.

Anyway, this guy suspects that I'm just fucking him up, so he leaves his place and stops the line. The bosses come over. Whenever a line stops, a red light goes on where the line stopped and all the bosses come over. What's the trouble? This guy here doesn't feel like working. No, that's a lie! I am working, it's just that I can't handle this yet because I'm still learning. I'm not half as smart as you; you've been here ten years, obviously a guy like you can learn everything right away. I wanted to make him squirm. Look, I said, you're a smart guy, it's ten years you're working here, so you understand everything, but for me it's a little hard. I just got back from being sick, too, so how can I work with this finger?

Then the boss says to me: Listen, it looks to me like you're just trying to goof off. You better remember that here at Fiat you have to work. No goofing off. If you want to goof off go see your friends on via Roma. I tell him:

Look, I can't say as I have any friends on via Roma. Anyway, I come here because I need money. I'm working, but I still haven't learned. When I learn, I'll work. You want to give me six days to work into the job or not? What do you mean six days? the boss says, You've already been here a month. A month, right, but I was working at that other position, not here. So now I need another six trial days, and the floater there is supposed to stay with me all six days. If he doesn't, I won't do a fucking thing.

I was supposed to tighten bolts, nine of them, on the mufflers. I had to stand there for eight hours holding the gun; the engine passed in front of me, I tightened the bolts, then it went on its way. Another worker put the muffler in and set up the bolts, all I had to do was tighten them. It was easy enough, but I had to stand there for eight hours holding that gun up over my arm or on my shoulder, an air-gun weighing twenty-eight pounds. See, I don't like jobs where I have to use just one hand, or one arm, where I can't use both at once. Because they make one shoulder get thicker than the other. You get deformed, one shoulder one way, the other shoulder another way, one muscle bigger than the other. It deforms you, it really does. But if you do those kinds of gymnastic movements where you're moving everything at the same time, now that doesn't bother me. But the acrobatics I had to go through on this job really pissed me off. Putting that motor on my shoulder, the noises *ratatatataratatara tat tat tat* – I couldn't stand it any more.

I had already decided to break with Fiat anyway, to make trouble for them. At this last confrontation with my floater the bosses from all the other lines all came over at the same time. The workers had stopped because my floater had already stopped the line. So they were all standing there looking at me, while I was looking at the bosses. So I threaten the boss, the floater, even the big boss, that other guy, the colonel, because he came over too. Look, I say, Fiat doesn't belong to me, get that in your heads. I didn't want it, I'm not the one who made it, I'm here to make money, that's all. But if you get me all pissed off, if you start breaking my balls, I'll bust your face in, every one of you. I'm saying this to them in front of all the workers. I had threatened them openly, but they couldn't take any risks, because they didn't know what I was up to, whether I was serious or not. So the big boss tried the old paternalism.

You're right, he tells me in front of the workers, but work is something important, it's something you have to do. Obviously you're a little nervous today, but there's nothing we can do about that. This isn't a hospital. Go take a rest, he says, moving closer to me. Go on sick leave, he says, standing next

to me in front of all the workers, and don't break balls for people who want to work. He was getting back at me, in other words. He gets back at me then cuts the conversation short: If you want to break balls go on sick leave, go fuck yourself for all I care, just don't break balls for people who work and want to work. There's no room here for fuckups, or crazies, or weaklings who don't want to work. Meanwhile the line was starting up again, and the workers weren't watching me any more.

Two Short Stories

by Nanni Balestrini

Nanni Balestrini was born in Milan in 1935. Known both as an experimental writer of prose and verse and as a cultural and political activist, he played a leading role in avant-garde writing and publishing in the sixties. His involvement with the extra-parliamentary left in the seventies resulted in terrorism charges (of which he was subsequently acquitted) and a long period of self-imposed exile from Italy.

Let A Thousand Hands... is an extract translated from the novel *La Violenza Illustrata* (Einaudi, 1976). Using one of Balestrini's favorite techniques, it is a montage of newspaper reports of the death of Mara Cagol, one of the founders of the Red Brigades.

FIAT (1977) is a first-hand account of work (or its refusal) at the infamous FIAT plant in Turin, Italy.

His major novels are *Gli Invisibili* (Bompiania, 1987; tr. *The Unseen*, Verso 1989) and *L'editore.* (Feltrinelli 1989)."